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“Time’s Carcase”: Waste, Labour, and Finance Capital in the Atlantic World-Ecology

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Abstract: This article deploys the category of ‘waste’ as an analytical optic through which to explore the connections between the degradation of labour, the contradictions of the value-form, the environment-making dynamics of commodity frontiers, and the whirl of finance capital. This investigation forms the basis of a comparison between two very different literary texts: Thomas Hardy’s short-story “On the Western Circuit” (1891), set in England’s semi-peripheral West Country; and José Américo de Almeida’s novel *Trash (A Bagaceira)*, 1928), set across northeast Brazil’s sugar zone and peripheral *sertão* region.

Keywords: world-ecology; world-literature; Thomas Hardy; José Américo de

Almeida; waste; labour; finance capital

“Time is everything, man is nothing; he is, at the most, time’s carcase.” So argued Marx in *The Poverty of Philosophy* as he sought to explain the transformation of labour under capitalism.¹ With the generalization of abstract labour-time as the measure of value, it is quantity, not quality, that is decisive in gauging the worth of an individual’s labour. Workers are distinguishable one from another only by “the length of time they take for their work.”² Marx’s description of the labourer as an animated corpse possessed by time (value) emphasizes how superfluous the body of the worker is to capital in a certain sense; for what counts is only abstract social labour – labour abstracted precisely from the concrete labours of specific bodies in the cause of determining a socially average quantity of time. Yet the body in its various concrete activities is fundamental to capital: value, as an immaterial yet objective social relation, needs that carcase. As David McNally observes: “For all its ghostly objectivity, value flourishes only by [. . .] temporarily possessing entities whose objectivity is appreciably more palpable. [. . .] The soul of value strives to capture the bodies of value, to

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possess them, and to evacuate them of all sensibility and concreteness, indeed to suck the life from them in the case of living labour.”³ Marx’s image thus registers the Gothic monstrosity of capitalism’s appropriation of life-energies. But it also encodes the structural ambiguity that characterizes value’s relation to what it produces (and treats) as waste. The paradoxical figure of the living dead is required to give expression to the paradox represented by the body in its concrete labours as waste matter that – for all it is integral to production – must be expelled by value insofar as these concrete labours, precisely as matter, cannot enter into value as immaterial relation.

In this article, I deploy the category of waste as an optic through which to analyse the connections between the degradation of labour, the contradictions of the value-form, the environment-making dynamics of commodity frontiers, and the whirl of finance capital. This analysis will inform my comparison of two very different literary texts: Thomas Hardy’s short-story “On the Western Circuit” (1891), set in England’s semi-peripheral West Country; and José Américo de Almeida’s novel *Trash (A Bagaceira)*, 1928, set across northeast Brazil’s sugar zone and peripheral *sertão* region. Underlying my comparative approach is an understanding of world literature as the literature of the capitalist world-system. I derive this understanding from the work of the research collective WReC, for whom capitalism is the “substrate” of world literature (or better, world-literature – the hyphen emphasizing its relationship to the world-system); capitalist modernity is “both what world-literature indexes or is ‘about’ and what gives world-literature its distinguishing formal characteristics.”⁴ The effectivity of the world-system, WReC contend, “will *necessarily* be discernible in any modern literary work, since the world-system exists unforgoably as the matrix” within which all such works take shape.⁵ To this proposition, however, I would add that the world-system must also be grasped, following environmental historian Jason W. Moore, as a world-ecology – as a specific, systemically patterned way of organizing nature.⁶ Capitalism, in this view,

develops through successive transformations in human and extra-human natures. Thus, these transformations will also *necessarily* be discernible in any modern literary work, since they too exist as the matrix within which all modern literature takes shape.

My interest, then, is in the way Hardy's and Almeida's texts register the localized articulation of the world-historical forms of life- and environment-making through which the dialectic of waste and value unfolds. This dialectic can be understood more specifically as expressing the contradiction between the reproduction of capital and the reproduction of life. Capital, argues Marx, in its insatiable appetite for surplus labour,

oversteps not only the moral but even the merely physical limits of the working day. It usurps the time for growth, development and healthy maintenance of the body. [. . .] Capital asks no questions about the length of life of labour-power. What interests it is purely and simply the maximum of labour-power that can be set in motion in a working day. It attains this objective by shortening the life of labour-power, in the same way as a greedy farmer snatches more produce from the soil by robbing it of its fertility.⁷

The tendency to exhaust not only labour-power, but also the vitality of extra-human nature is not something that overly concerns capital so long as it can secure fresh supplies of both. To the extent that such fresh supplies have been reproduced outside the circuit of capital, they represent a repository of unpaid work that capital can seize upon as a "free gift."⁸ This unpaid work is performed both by humans and the rest of nature: it might take the form of, say, the domestic labour required to reproduce the individual, or the biophysical processes through which soil fertility is maintained. By appropriating such unpaid work, capital can ensure a greater throughput of energy within the production process at no extra cost. This is the

argument put forward by Moore, who follows Marx in understanding abstract social labour as the substance of the value-form, but contends that whereas “Marxist political economy has taken value to be an *economic* phenomenon with systemic implications, the inverse formulation may be more plausible: value-relations are a *systemic* phenomenon with a pivotal economic moment.”⁹ The accumulation of abstract social labour is possible only to the degree that unpaid work by humans and the rest of nature can be appropriated. Absent such unpaid work, “the costs of production would rise, and accumulation would slow.”¹⁰ The value-form (the commodity) is thus constitutively shadowed by its more expansive conditions of reproduction, which, as unpaid work, are unvalued.

The production of value, therefore, depends on that which is unvalued. Yet from the perspective of capital’s logic of endless accumulation, the duration required for the (unpaid) reproduction of human and biophysical natures – precisely because it is not directly subordinate to the metric of abstract labour-time – is a *waste of time* insofar as it runs up against the imperative to turn a profit within the socially-necessary turnover time. Seeking, as a result, to more closely control and speed-up the delivery of unpaid work to commodity production, capitalism tends to commodify what it had previously been able to treat as a “free gift,” thereby driving up production costs.

Such cost increases may be met with the further reorganization of human and extra-human natures in the sphere of commodity production (paid work). This might involve efforts to improve efficiency and reduce wastes of time by rationalizing work routines or radically simplifying environments. Such productivity increases tend to go hand in hand with new forms of plunder. Crucial in this regard has been the global movement of commodity frontiers – spaces of extraction or production (such as mines or cash-crop plantations) that reorganize human and biophysical natures in such a way as to send vast reservoirs of cheap goods into the global economy. In so doing, they help reduce the system-wide costs of

production. Commodity frontiers too, however, tend ultimately to undermine the ‘cheap natures’ they initially mobilize. Propelled by the self-expansionary logic of capital, they exhaust their ecological conditions of possibility, degrading land and labour to the point at which profitability falters and new sites of exploitation must be secured. In this sense, commodity frontiers unfold through the production of waste just as much as the production of value. From over-exploited bodies to toxified soils, every commodity frontier, as Moore observes, “is also a waste frontier.”¹¹

The movement of commodity frontiers in search of fresh streams of nature’s bounty is frequently entwined with another of capital’s typical responses to rising production costs: its flight into the realm of fictitious capital. Here, capital seeks to eliminate not merely wastes of time but time itself through financialization. As Joshua Clover has remarked, insofar as the subordination of the circuit of capital (M-C-M') to the logic of financialized accumulation (M-M') involves the removal of the commodity phase (C), it entails the “subtraction of time” since “the commodity par excellence is that of labour power, the value of which is measured in time.”¹² The florescence of finance capital might thus be seen as capital attempting to free itself, in the context of declining returns on productive investment, from the whole messy, now wasteful business of the labouring body and its productive activities.

The dates of publication of Hardy’s and Almeida’s works correspond to a period of transition in the capitalist world-system during which the responses I have outlined above to faltering profit rates were all very much to the fore. Hardy’s story takes place against the backdrop of the “Great Depression” of 1873-96, which marked the “signal crisis” of the British-led systemic cycle of accumulation of the long nineteenth century.¹³ The economic downturn encouraged efforts to increase industrial productivity through technical and scientific innovation. This was the era of the “second industrial revolution” as the “age of coal and iron” gave way to that of “steel and electricity, of oil and chemicals.”¹⁴ As this

periodization suggests, such technical advances were inextricable from the movement of new commodity frontiers, which ransacked the globe in the hunt for cheap inputs. Not coincidentally, of course, this was also the era of the ‘new’ imperialism, itself connected to an efflorescence of finance capital. Both during and after the depression of 1873-96, declining opportunities for profitable investment in industry led many capitalists (especially in Britain) to pursue “an increasing range of speculative activities.”¹⁵ Hardy’s “On the Western Circuit,” I will argue, can be read in the light of this flight of capital away from production towards that more rarefied economic realm in which money breeds money.

Trash, meanwhile, was published on the eve of the final crumbling of the British-led regime of accumulation, the “terminal crisis” of which was signalled by the crash of 1929 and subsequent depression.¹⁶ Almeida’s narrative is bookended by the droughts that hit the *sertão* in 1898 and 1915. It registers the harsh labour conditions in Brazil’s Northeast, as well as the modernization of the region’s sugar industry – the local expression of the restructuring of the world-ecology following the 1873-96 crisis. Far less obviously, it also registers the phenomenology of financialization as this was experienced in the peripheries of the world-system. The novel’s timeframe corresponds to the period of the Edwardian *belle époque* (1896-1914), one of those “wonderful moments” capitalism periodically experiences as the switch to financialized accumulation eases competitive pressures, allowing for a brief flowering of prosperity.¹⁷ *Trash*, as its title suggests, is an exemplary text for any consideration of how the category of waste might be mobilized to help dissect the relationship between the logic of financialization and the exhaustive plunder of human and extra-human natures.

In recent years, ‘waste’ has become an increasingly significant analytical optic in the humanities and social sciences.¹⁸ Broadly speaking, two main (if substantially overlapping) lines of enquiry can be identified. The first is concerned with waste in the form of refuse, pollutants, excrement, and other detritus.¹⁹ The second is concerned with what Zygmunt Bauman calls the “wasted lives” of surplus or “superfluous” populations, including the unemployed, migrants, and refugees.²⁰ Surveying contemporary accounts of unemployment, Michael Denning cautions that for all its rhetorical power, Bauman’s “overly glib linking of material waste and human waste [. . .] repeats one of the oldest tropes regarding the wageless – that they are akin to garbage, rubbish.” The logic by which globalization produces redundancy, argues Denning, “would be better understood not through the deceptively concrete image of wasted lives,” but through a dialectical account of the relationship between waged and “wageless” life.²¹

Denning’s critique of Bauman is salutary. It might usefully be supplemented by Michelle Yates’ assertion that Bauman fails “to ground the modernizing process, and waste as outcome of this process, theoretically, in the capitalist system in which it is properly embedded.”²² Crucially, a number of critics (including Yates) have sought to elaborate a dialectical conception of waste that has much to contribute to precisely the kind of analysis Denning advocates. Vinay Gidwani, for example, posits waste as “immanent to capital’s becoming-being”: on the one hand, it is “capitalist value-in-waiting”; on the other, “it is an omnipresent logic of dissipation that evades or exceeds capital’s dialectic, threatening its legitimacy and existence.”²³ Waste, thus, is something like the degree zero of value: not “forever outside value’s ken, but rather its limit and future possible.”²⁴

Historically, capitalism could be said to emerge through the elimination of ‘wastes’ in the form of the enclosure of common wastes (recast by advocates of enclosure as “wasted commons”); the seizure and cultivation of the “waste lands” of the colonies; and the

disciplining of the ‘wasteful’ bodies of those landless men and women who were branded vagabonds and idlers and forcibly inducted into the new regimens of production.²⁵ Yet, as Marx observed, for all that it is concerned with eliminating waste, “capitalist production is thoroughly wasteful with human material.”²⁶ We have already touched on capitalism’s tendency to degrade and exhaust the labourer. It also tends systematically to generate unemployment. The “greater attraction of workers by capital,” wrote Marx, “is accompanied by their greater repulsion”; it is capitalist accumulation itself that “constantly produces, and produces indeed in direct relation with its own energy and extent, a relatively redundant working population, i.e. a population which is superfluous to capital’s average requirements for its own valorization, and is therefore a surplus population.”²⁷ The accumulation of surplus-value, then, is the accumulation of wasted labour. Ejected from the circuit of production, the surplus population provides a pool of potential workers for capital to seize upon when necessary (in that sense, they are Gidwani’s “capitalist value-in-waiting”). Even in its superfluous state, however, this ‘wasted’ labour remains integral to the continuation of surplus-value production, since “the pressure of the unemployed compels those who are employed to furnish more labour.”²⁸

Marx’s comments on capital’s creation of a surplus population were, of course, written in the latter half of the nineteenth century – the very period in which unemployment as an empirical category was “invented” by the “emerging social state [. . .] in the process of normalizing and regulating the market in labour.”²⁹ As Denning observes, “the word itself emerged just when the phenomenon became the object of state knowledge production in the long economic downturn of the 1880s and 1890s.”³⁰ Significantly, a new discourse on waste also came to prominence at this time. Patrick Brantlinger and Richard Higgins argue that between roughly 1870 and World War I, an emphasis on the “reversibility of wealth and waste” appeared in the work of thinkers as diverse as Thorstein Veblen, H. G. Wells, John

Ruskin and Friedrich Nietzsche.³¹ In the case of Veblen and Wells, this interest in waste was tied to a critique of the prodigality of capitalism and the parasitism of a new “leisure class”. Veblen’s most familiar concept, “conspicuous consumption,” also means “conspicuous waste,” which serves to “absorb any increase in [. . .] industrial efficiency or output of goods, after the most elementary physical wants have been provided for.”³² One of Veblen’s targets were the exclusive books produced by William Morris’s Kelmscott Press. Yet Morris too was concerned with the conspicuous waste generated by capitalism, delivering a series of lectures on the subject in the 1880s.³³ Given the context in which such critiques were articulated – the depression in the world-economy; rising unemployment; the flourishing of finance capital (itself typically connected to an increase in conspicuous consumption³⁴) – it is not altogether surprising that they should turn so centrally on the problematic of waste.

This context, broadly speaking, was also the one in which Hardy was writing. His evocations of rural life are marked by the impact had on English agriculture by the growth in unemployment and the fall in prices caused by the depression of 1873-96.³⁵ Think, for example, of his description of the difficulties confronting agricultural workers in his essay “The Dorsetshire Labourer” (1883), or of the initial appearance of Michael Henchard as an unemployed hay-trusser in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886). But his work also captures the response prompted by the crisis in the countryside, most notably the increasing mechanization of farming as a means to ratchet up the plunder of ecological surpluses from the land and the labourer.³⁶ Consider the well-known scene in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1891) in which Tess is forced to work on a steam-threshing machine that saps “the endurance of [her] muscles and nerves.”³⁷ Plunged into a “stupefied reverie” by the spinning of the thresher’s drum, she is reduced to little more than an animated carcase, her movements determined by the devilish will of the “Plutonic master” she serves.³⁸ The juxtaposition of Tess’s exhausted body with the “immense stack of straw” excreted like “faeces” by the

machine suggests the dialectical relationship between waste and value, while also echoing the contemporary discourse of the reversibility of wealth and waste.³⁹

Some of these same concerns could be said to haunt Hardy's "On the Western Circuit" (originally published in the same year as *Tess* in the *English Illustrated Magazine*). Here, however, the impact of the Great Depression on labour and production figures only in highly displaced form. The narrative concerns Charles Raye, a junior barrister from London who has come to Wessex to do the rounds of the local assizes. Here he falls in love with Anna, a servant girl he catches sight of at a fair in Melchester. Due to the peripatetic nature of his job, their relationship is conducted largely through the exchange of letters. Yet unbeknownst to Charles it is Anna's mistress, Edith Harnham, who writes the letters for her servant girl since the latter is illiterate. Edith falls in love with Charles in the process of corresponding with him; and, moved by her letters, he in effect falls in love with her. Ultimately Anna's secret is revealed, but not until after Charles has married her. He resolves to stay with her, but with a heavy heart and a sense that he has compromised his life and career.

The story begins with a scene partly reminiscent of the threshing scene in *Tess*. An alien machine, in this instance a steam-powered roundabout, has intruded into Wessex, its presence there coded as hellish and phantasmagorical. The spectacle of the fair at which three such roundabouts are in operation is "that of the eighth chasm of the Inferno":

A smoky glare, of the complexion of brass-filings, ascended from the fiery tongues of innumerable naphtha lamps [. . .]. In front of this irradiation scores of human figures, more or less in profile, were darting athwart and across, up, down, and around, like gnats against a sunset.

Their motions were so rhythmical that they seemed to be moved by machinery. And it presently appeared that they were moved by machinery indeed; the figures being those of the patrons of swings, see-saws, flying leaps, above all of the three steam roundabouts which occupied the centre of the position.⁴⁰

Although not a description of labouring bodies, the scene is nonetheless suggestive of the dislocating, estranging effect of the contemporary modernization of the English countryside. Indeed, the representation of the human figures gestures towards the increasing mechanization of agricultural production. Reduced to, as it were, lifeless bodies animated only by the movement of the machinery, the figures are at the mercy of the steam-engine's "inexorable stoker" (246) who at any moment might bring the contraption to a halt, jettisoning the riders. These riders are mainly country folk of lower status than Charles (himself an intrusive presence into Wessex). For this urban middle-class onlooker, the "revolving figures passed before his eyes with an unexpected and quiet grace in a throng whose natural movements did not suggest gracefulness or quietude as a rule" (245). The movements of the machine are thus perceived to have disciplined the otherwise unruly bodies of the riders, just as the new machineries of production were designed to rationalize the extraction of surplus labour. Anna's place on this carousel is secured by Charles, who repeatedly throws his money into circulation to keep her body governed by the motions of the machine.

For all that the roundabout gestures to the steam-powered machines of modern agriculture, however, it is, of course, a means of leisure. With this in mind, I want to suggest that the whirl of the roundabout alludes not only to the reorganization of production, but also to the reverse face of the economic conjuncture: the whirl of financialization and the rise of a new rentier leisure class. In a compelling analysis of the story, John Plotz argues that the

presence of the steam roundabout creates a “phantasmagoric effect that engenders a thoroughly mistaken love at first sight, a sort of love impossible in *anteindustrial* Wessex. The steam circuses do not merely conceal some aspect of reality, but create, in a viewer’s eye, an illusion that becomes *preferable* to reality.”⁴¹ This escape into an illusory world wreathed in immaterial steam is suggestive of the contemporary flight of investment away from the sphere of material production towards the more abstract realm of fictitious capital. “On the Western Circuit” registers the phenomenal experience of an increasingly financialized society, one subject to the pressures exerted by volatile money and capital markets. Crucially, the relationship between Charles and Anna hinges not only on the judicial circuit of the title, which brings Charles to Wessex, but also on a form of financial speculation. As Plotz notes, money is present at their initial meeting at the roundabout, if not “producing then at least sustaining the original blur.”⁴² By throwing his cash into circulation to enable Anna to continue to ride the carousel, Charles “sends their relationship into the realm of possible futurity.”⁴³ He moves from being a spectator to a speculator. His money allows him to go on enjoying Anna’s motion, an enjoyment derived from sending her away, not in keeping her near him – much as the finance capitalist profits not from the purchase of labour-power to be set to work, but by sending money out into the world. Moreover, having constructed his initial image of her from the blurred fragments of various girls he sees on the carousel, Charles throws his money not after Anna in any material sense, but after a fiction produced by the whirl of the roundabout.

Speculative financial activity, therefore, is presented by the story as the basis of a deceitful relationship. Indeed, money “precisely *alienates* the two who are using it, deferring the conversation (not held till after the wedding) that would undeceive Charles and Anna as to each other’s pre-simulation identity.”⁴⁴ Tellingly, “On the Western Circuit” appeared in the wake of the financial panic of 1890, otherwise known as the Baring crisis, during which

Barings Bank in London was driven to near insolvency following excessive financial risk-taking on poor investments in Argentina.⁴⁵ Hardy's portrayal of speculative transactions as the source of personal turmoil might thus be seen as peculiarly inflected by the financial instability of the time. The presentation of Charles is noteworthy in this regard. It should be stressed that he is as much guilty of deceit as Anna, taking advantage of this girl of "limited capabilities" with no intention of allowing what for him is a "summer fancy" to "greatly encumb[er] his life" (253). His pursuit of fleeting romantic pleasures adds to the impression that, despite his status as an aspiring professional, this "end-of-the-age young man" is more akin to a member of Veblen's leisure class (252). He is initially described as having "nothing square or practical about his look, much that was curvilinear and sensuous. Indeed, some would have called him a man not altogether typical of the middle-class male of a century where sordid ambition is the master-passion" (245). Later, he is said to belong "to the classes that live on expectation" (254) and to be "sensuous, and, superficially at least, infested with the self-indulgent vices of artificial society" (261). The text, moreover, persistently describes him or his actions as "idle" – he is an "idle spectator" (246), he has an "idle touch" (250), he is drawn to "idle pleasures" in town (253), and so on. Charles, then, appears to resemble a member of the rentier-financier class more than he does any entrepreneurial, bourgeois captain of industry.

If the relationship established at the roundabout is indicative of the structures of experience of a financialized society, so too is the third circuit on which the story turns, that of the epistolary communication between Charles and Anna. The letters they send one another might be seen as representative of the kinds of speculative cultural forms that, as Ian Baucom contends, flourish at moments of financial expansion.⁴⁶ Baucom suggests that the rise of credit "enshrined the imagination as a new force at the heart of economic, political and social life."⁴⁷ Fittingly, in the context of a renewed proliferation in forms of credit, Charles

and Anna's relationship is one predicated on the imagination – on what Charles imagines Anna to be like on the basis of the imagination displayed in 'her' written expressions of sentiment. Indeed, the phenomenology of their relationship is symptomatic of the “phenomenology of transactions, promises, character, credibility” demanded by the credit system to complement its accounting protocols.⁴⁸ As part of the transaction between Charles and Anna, he extracts a promise from her that she will write to him, her letters (written by Edith) providing the information on which he ultimately assesses her character and comes to credit her in a way he had not done so before:

The letter moved Raye considerably when it reached him. The intelligence itself had affected him less than her unexpected manner of treating him in relation to it. The absence of any word of reproach, the devotion to his interests, the self-sacrifice apparent in every line, all made up a nobility of character that he had never dreamt of finding in womankind. (260)

The letter on which Charles bases his decision to continue speculating on his relationship with Anna can be grasped as a form of fictitious capital in a double sense: both insofar as it becomes representative of the symbolic capital Charles believes Anna to possess and wants to invest in (the slip of paper he receives is in effect a share on which he bases his future claim on her); and in the sense that this symbolic capital really is a fiction, since the letter is in fact written by Edith. And in this latter sense, of course, Charles has credited something – invested in something – that is not as well capitalized (in symbolic terms) as he believed. He has over-valued Anna; and when the truth of her illiteracy is revealed – when the speculative bubble bursts, so to speak – his world comes crashing down. Envisioning his future in the aftermath of his marriage, he sees “as it were a galley, in which he, the fastidious

urban, was chained to work for the remainder of his life, with her, the unlettered peasant, chained to his side” (268). The speculator who has pursued illusory, immaterial riches (in love) is thus brought down to earth, to the everyday material reality of work and the corporeal.

Charles’ appalled vision of himself chained to the body of a peasant – a labourer – can be interpreted with reference to the thematic of waste and value. To return to the opening scene at the roundabout: it could be said that Charles exhibits a kind of double vision here. As he watches the various real bodies of the riders whirling in front of him, his vision constructs an illusory body from the physical motions of three girls in particular, which he then attributes solely to Anna, who he decides on as the “prettiest” (246). Charles’ double vision might be likened to the double character of the capitalist value-form. In his essay “Labour, Language, and Finance Capital,” Richard Godden follows Moishe Postone in proposing value as a non-identical unity: value, he writes, which “stands in for something else [. . .], will always be shadowed, in the form of an ‘impertinence,’ by that which it nominally displaces – or, better, creatively mis-takes.”⁴⁹ The impertinent shadow to which Godden refers is concrete labour. Such labour is necessary to the creation of value; yet value – as abstract labour-time – must expel the concrete particularity of the labour of the human body, treating this body and its activities as (waste) matter to be displaced in the cause of determining a socially average quantity of time. Here, contends Godden, “in the passage of labour into abstract labour, lies the founding duplicity of capitalist value, whose tension will not go away.”⁵⁰ Indeed, as Godden emphasizes when turning specifically to the “enchanted world of finance capital,” the “real world of labour under capital inheres as a structural ‘remainder’ and reminder within the formation of capitalist value, existing, therefore, as a ‘dynamic contradiction’ interior to the appearance of enchantment and not simply long gone from a notional ‘outside’, occupied by a receding and redundant essence of labour.”⁵¹

It is precisely the tension generated by concrete labour as the haunting residuum or impertinent shadow of value that Charles, the idle spectator who becomes a speculator, must confront in his betrothal to Anna. Seeking through his illusory image of womanhood, born from abstracting from a series of bodies on the roundabout, to profit from a blissful marriage, he finds he is unable to escape the brute matter of the labourer's body. Anna, once revealed as illiterate, is surplus to his requirements; he wants only Edith, the real author of the letters he credits so much. The servant girl, or the "peasant" as Charles now perceives her, is merely waste. He would gladly dispose of her, but the world of work this "peasant" represents cannot, it seems, be sidestepped. If Charles' situation thereby figures the double character of the value-form, it also speaks to the non-identical unity of this value-form with its necessary value-relations, that is, with the socially necessary *unpaid* work that is the historical condition of socially necessary labour-time. Through his marriage to Anna, Charles had hoped to benefit from the unpaid work she could provide not only in the domestic sphere, but also as an accessory at social gatherings, where she would be expected to perform the role of a "professional man's wife" (262). Part of the crisis he confronts is that due to her status and lack of education, she is incapable of doing so. His effort to accumulate social capital, in other words, is jeopardized by his inability to secure the kind of unpaid work he requires.

The accrual of such social capital is necessary to Charles' career; but his ultimate goal – expressed in his complaint that in being chained to Anna he is "chained to work for the remainder of his life" – would appear to be to break free from the world of work altogether and escape the whole messy business of the labouring body. In the context of the financial panic of 1890, Charles' comeuppance takes on the appearance of a warning to those who would indulge in speculative activities and treat too lightly the realities of (working) life. But if the story might thus be viewed as a kind of moral fable (perhaps significantly, it was first republished in Hardy's collection *Life's Little Ironies*), the same context that encourages such

a reading also underscores the narrative's registration, at the level of something like its political unconscious, of the economic logic of the era. For Charles' trajectory recalls the trajectory of finance capital, which similarly wishes to avoid the perils of production, seeking to by-pass the commodity phase (C) of capital's general circuit, M-C-M'. Yet, as Clover emphasizes (echoing Godden), despite finance capital's flight from "the concrete context of its productive geography," the "financialized formula M-M' is in fact always the formula M-M'[C]" since "the labour commodity is not truly routed around" but "must perforce await in the future" as the source of the value upon which those speculative activities ultimately depend.⁵²

Clover, then, highlights how the rarefied heights of finance capital remain haunted by the hidden abodes of production. But might it not also be possible to read his statement as indicative of capital's tendency to conjoin financialization with new rounds of plunder? That is, might the C in M-M'[C] equally be the commodity frontier? Commodity frontiers, as noted earlier, function to send vast reservoirs of cheap goods into the global economy, thereby helping to lower production costs. The extension of such frontiers into new territories during periods of faltering profitability tends to go hand in hand with the flourishing of fictitious capital: at the same time as declining returns on productive investment send capital scurrying off into the financial sphere, the pressure to reduce costs and restore profit rates propels the frontier-led search for fresh streams of nature's bounty. The flight to the realm of M-M', therefore, is necessarily shadowed by C, the commodity frontier, as the means by which the underlying stagnation in the productive economy might be overcome.

In "On the Western Circuit" the faint shadow of the commodity frontier can be detected behind the images of steam-driven roundabouts with which the story begins. As I have suggested, these register not only the whirl of financialization, but also (albeit in highly displaced form) the increasing mechanization of the countryside in response to the

contemporary depression in agriculture, crucial to which was the relative exhaustion of the English grain frontier and its inability to compete with imports from “the newly opened-up wheat lands of the North American prairies and Argentina.”⁵³ But such frontier movements constitute only a distant background to Hardy’s narrative. For a more explicit representation of their unfolding we must leave Wessex and cross the Atlantic to Latin America. Here, in a context overdetermined by imperialist domination, the pressures generated by the metropolitan demand for cheap raw materials precipitated an export boom that lasted roughly from 1870 to 1930. In the final section of this essay, then, I consider Almeida’s *Trash*, which captures life on the sugar frontier in Brazil’s Northeast in the latter days of the boom.

By the 1920s, Brazil’s Northeast had emerged as a specific regional geography with an identity defined by harsh environmental conditions (most notably the periodic droughts that gripped the sertão backlands) and a “problematic if ardent embrace of modernity.”⁵⁴ The Northeast’s experience of modernization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century has been neatly summarized by Durval Muniz de Albuquerque: “Juxtaposed alongside fields of cotton and sugar plantations,” he writes, “were now telegraph cables, telephone lines, and railroads. Hudson, Ford, and Studebaker automobiles as well as Great Western railway cars sped commerce but catalysed its detrimental impacts on the environment, as mountains were scraped clean of foliage and smoke darkened the sky. Traditional modes and rhythms of life were transformed.”⁵⁵ In response to these transformations, as well as to a perceived need to assert the specificity and significance of the Northeast in opposition to the growing dominance of the South (not least its economic powerhouse São Paulo), various regional

intellectuals produced work celebrating what were construed as the Northeast's distinctive cultural and social traditions.

Perhaps the most influential of these discourses was that associated with the sociologist Gilberto Freyre, who in books such as *Casa-Grande e Senzala* (1933) and *Nordeste* (1937) located the essential values and identity of the region in its coastal sugar-cane plantations. Freyre was concerned by what he viewed as the disruption to social equilibrium caused by modernization and its impact on the sugar industry. In the late nineteenth century, the industry “began a major change in its productive organization with the establishment of large mills (*usinas*), which absorbed many smaller *engenhos* and brought downward mobility for many in the traditional planter class.”⁵⁶ Exemplifying Brazil's subordination to metropolitan financial hegemony, the owners of the modernized *usinas* were often foreign or foreign-born; indeed, the “northeastern sugar fazendas were the very paradigm of dependence upon British capital.”⁵⁷ Freyre regarded the *usinas* as a socially and ecologically degrading force. Criticizing the rapacious logic of the sugar frontier, he lamented the devastation of the soil by monoculture and the fouling of rivers by waste from the mills. His response to this state of affairs, however, was primarily a nostalgic, conciliatory one. He “wanted to restore the Northeast as it was before the expansion in scale of the smoke-belching sugar factories with their reeking cauldrons, the ‘progress,’ the destructive affectations that were changing traditional social relations.”⁵⁸ Against the image of the filthy *usinas*, Freyre posed the traditional *engenhos* – organized around the patriarchal authority of the master or *senhor* – as the embodiment of a past of power and harmony, one that could steer the development of the Northeast in a direction coincident with its ‘values’. His “utopia was the return of an idealized society in which technical advancement was not necessarily an enemy of tradition, if it was diligently controlled; in which tradition and modernity strolled together, the latter supported and guided by the firm masculine arm of the former.”⁵⁹

Almeida's *Trash* responds to the same historical pressures as Freyre's work, albeit it is animated by a very different political vision. As Albuquerque observes, the novel is "deeply transitional, pivoting between [. . .] naturalist and modernist aesthetics, just as its subject is the transformation of a patriarchal society to a bourgeois one."⁶⁰ But where Freyre lamented the erosion of the quasi-feudal authority of the *senhor de engenhos*, Almeida wished to hasten its decline. For him, the modernization of the Northeast was imperative; and modernization could not be achieved if it were to be guided by the plantation oligarchy, since this oligarchy, along with Brazil's Republican government, were responsible for the region's underdevelopment in the first place.⁶¹ Almeida's vision of modernization instead emphasized the integration and development of the impoverished, drought-stricken lands of the sertão.

In the period following independence, nationalist authors had turned to the sertão in search of landscapes and customs that might be mobilized as images of Brazilian cultural autonomy. However, by the time of the proclamation of the Republic in 1889 (and in the wake of the Great Drought of 1877-1879), the area had shifted from "an idealized repository of national identity toward a danger zone that threaten[ed] the construction of the modern nation."⁶² Through its representation in literary texts, newspaper articles, and official reports (in which an ideology of racial and environmental determinism was typically present), the sertão emerged as a backward, degraded, constitutively anti-modern space. This discourse helped to enable and justify repressive state policies towards its inhabitants, who came to be associated with mass disorder, banditry, and disease.⁶³ Almeida sought to challenge this presentation of the sertão. Blaming its impoverishment on government neglect and the influence of the local oligarchy, he revived in some measure the earlier representation of the region as a site of authentic Brazilian values. For Almeida, however, if the sertão was to contribute to the development of the nation it required modernization, a task he pursued as

minister of transportation and public works in the government of Getúlio Vargas following the revolution of 1930.

Given Almeida's active involvement in the revolution, one might view *Trash* as staging something like a cultural rehearsal of the class politics surrounding Vargas's rise to power. Vargas's movement was supported by the national industrial bourgeoisie and directed "against the agrarian, commercial and metropolitan interests which had shaped and benefited from previous governmental policy."⁶⁴ As Mark Anderson notes, Almeida's novel

constructs a geographic opposition [. . .] between three conflictive spaces: the *brejo*, or lush mountainous highlands of coastal Paraíba, is placed in opposition to the [. . .] *sertão* as well as to the metropole [. . .]. By no means a third meditating space, the *brejo* represents a morally and racially degraded area in which the feudal economy of the [. . .] sugar plantation prevails and individual initiative is smothered by patriarchal egoism and animal instinct. In a snub to Gilberto Freyre's nascent thesis of an integrated Northeast based on the coastal 'sugar civilization,' Almeida describes the sugar plantation as a moral and economic wasteland.⁶⁵

Alongside Almeida's corresponding revalorization of the *sertão*, therefore, the symbolic geography of *Trash* speaks to the political concerns of the industrial bourgeoisie in the lead up to the revolution, imaginatively rehearsing what it would mean to appeal to, and potentially ally with, the popular classes in the struggle against the agrarian oligarchs. This projection of the possibility of a cross-class alliance is manifested in the developing relationship between the characters of Lúcio and Soledade. Lúcio, the enlightened son of a plantation owner, has been educated in the city and advocates the modernization of the rural economy. Soledade, a beautiful young woman from the backlands, arrives on Lúcio's father's

plantation with a group of refugees fleeing drought in the sertão. Their union would symbolize the integration of the sertão into the modern nation, with the domestication of Soledade “coincid[ing] with the modernization of the agricultural economy.”⁶⁶

Crucially, however, this union fails, with Soledade not only returning to the sertão but doing so with Lúcio’s father. Lúcio, meanwhile, marries the daughter of the owner of a *usina*. The text thus abandons its rehearsal of a cross-class alliance, staging instead the possibility of an intra-bourgeois one. (In so doing, it presages the fate of the 1930 revolution, which devolved into compromise between the old agrarian interests and the new industrialists over a share of the spoils of office.)⁶⁷ The modernized plantation Lúcio establishes following his marriage becomes an emblem for the new nation. It represents “an oasis of prosperity, a model of agricultural technology whose efficiency contrasted with the old primitive methods” – methods that had earlier been said to impoverish the soil, turn the landscape “into a waste”, and rely on exploitative modes of labour regulation that were “unrewarding” and “wasted” the “energy” of the workers.⁶⁸ However, just as the symbolic coupling of Lúcio and Soledade misfires, so the symbolism of the modernized plantation is far from unproblematic. Lúcio’s idyll of lush cultivated fields and well-adjusted, productive labourers remains haunted by the wasted figures of starving refugees from the backlands, as well as by the continued lack of sympathy displayed by his *brejeiro* workers towards the *sertanejos*.

The haunting quality of the drought-stricken migrants is emphasized by the narrative twist at the end of the novel, when the drought of 1915 brings Soledade, who had been thought dead, back to Lúcio’s door: “The deep shadows under her eyes spread a violet hue over all her face. Her skin was dark and coarsened, showing the lines of the bones, and her cheeks so shrunken she seemed to have three mouths. She looked about her with a sad expression that seemed to make her nose longer. Finally, so as not to fall, she leaned against the wall and remained there looking like a shadow” (159). Soledade’s wasted, disquieting

body here stands as a variant on the image of the labouring body as a carcase, a residuum, an “impertinent shadow” (as Godden puts it), which capital exploits, exhausts, and expels as waste, and yet can never jettison fully. For Lúcio, she is a reminder of the suffering, devitalized bodies that had laboured on his father’s plantation, a world he had hoped to supersede by his rational reorganization of work routines and his respectful, compassionate attitude to his employees. The suggestion is that he cannot in fact escape the degrading, exploitative dynamics of the sugar frontier: the systemic compulsion to exhaust human (and extra-human) natures will continue to weigh upon his dreams of an enlightened form of labour discipline – a potential return of the repressed foreshadowed perhaps by Soledade’s having arrived with a young boy whom Lúcio is forced to recognize as his brother.

Soledade’s disfigured body – at once both lacking and excessive, emaciated yet proliferating (her “three mouths”, her distended nose) – is but one of many similarly grotesque bodies that stalk the novel. Early on in the narrative, for example, we encounter the “exodus from the drought of 1898”:

A resurrection from ancient cemeteries of resuscitated skeletons of claylike appearance and stinking of the charnel house. Emaciated ghosts, their shaky, unsteady steps seemed like a dance as they dragged themselves along in the manner of one who is carrying his legs instead of being carried by them. [. . .] They were more dead than alive. [. . .] They sniffed the sickly smell of the molasses which only exacerbated the pangs of their empty stomachs; but instead of eating, they themselves were eaten by their own hunger, in self-destructive autophagia. (14-15)

Such gritty yet lyrical descriptions of starving bodies – bodies that are “eaten by their own hunger” even as they are surrounded by the smell deriving from the production of a wealth of

cash-crops – capture the combination of glut and lack that characterized the Northeast’s sugar zone. As Lance La Rocque observes, Almeida “makes the hungering flesh into a main character of the novel.”⁶⁹ This emphasis on the agency of hunger, in conjunction with Almeida’s persistent mobilization of the paradoxical figure of the living dead, speaks to the specific dynamics of underdevelopment in the Northeast. For here the abundance of cheap labour available to the plantations when drought expelled the *sertanejos* from the backlands tended to discourage productivity-raising capital investment. The large landowners relied precisely on hunger, in tandem with the distinctive geography of the region, to perpetuate the production of surplus-value. As Mike Davis explains, “from the 1870s onward, the Nordeste was effectively capitalized on the fluxes of labour between the backlands and the coast. Potentially explosive accumulations of poor and unemployed labourers in the littoral were diverted into the subsistence economy of the sertão, then periodically regurgitated towards the coast by drought. The sertão, in effect, provided welfare for the poor, while drought guaranteed that desperate labourers would always be available to depress wages on the coast.”⁷⁰ Almeida’s emaciated yet grotesquely excessive revenants, therefore, embody the peculiar form assumed in the Northeast by capital’s tendency to generate a surplus population of ‘wasted’ labour as the very condition of expanded value production.

Trash, then, at the level of both content and imagery, registers the transformations in human and extra-human natures through which the Northeast’s sugar frontier developed. But it also gestures, I want finally to suggest, to the commodity frontier’s more rarefied twin: finance capital. As noted earlier, the novel’s timeframe corresponds to the period of the Edwardian *belle époque*, during which the grip exerted by metropolitan finance over Brazil’s economy intensified. More significantly, perhaps, the novel was written and published in the era of the Washington Luis presidency. Under Luis, the Brazilian government gave full support to the entry of foreign capital into the country (albeit with the emphasis now on U.S.

rather than British financial interests).⁷¹ The brief ‘boom’ this generated, in combination with the further ratcheting up of foreign domination and the strangulation of Brazilian industry, might be said to find expression in *Trash*’s formal and stylistic idiosyncrasies.

I have already drawn attention to the novel’s lyrical descriptions of starving refugees. Such poeticism has been much remarked upon by critics, who highlight the unevenness of Almeida’s narrative. Fred Ellison, for example, suggests that “there is a regrettable lack of correspondence between the observed reality of characters and actions and the language in which this reality is projected. [. . .] The human events upon which the novel is based are ugly and sombre, but the novelist’s descriptions of them are intensely poetic, with too much imagery, too much striving for effect.”⁷² This disjunctive form speaks to the uneven logic of the sugar frontier, with Almeida’s images of suffering bodies emphasizing the brutal reality of exploitation in the Northeast. Yet what the author himself refers to in the novel’s prologue as the narrative’s “sentimental excesses” simultaneously abstract from this reality, dematerializing it through the mobilization of an affective, highly aestheticized register. Such is the intensity of Almeida’s descriptions that they frequently assume a kind of phantasmagoric quality, as with his account of the *sertanejos* as “emaciated ghosts” who appear to be “carrying [their] legs” rather than being “carried by them.” The narrative’s flights of poetic fancy strive to evoke or capture a realm of feeling and experience that is beyond or supplementary to observable reality (in the prologue, significantly, Almeida avers that “to see clearly is not to see at all but to see what is hidden from others” [11]). Given the historical and economic context in which he was working, Almeida’s striving after the unseen can be viewed as a response to a local reality in which the invisible hand of fictitious capital, emanating from distant cities (whether São Paulo or Rio de Janeiro, London or New York), periodically re-shapes lives and landscapes. *Trash*’s formal disjunctions, in other words, encode a structure of feeling that corresponds to a situation in which everyday life is

overdetermined by the abstract forces of finance capital, yet in which, too, such forces are peculiarly occulted by the apparent ‘obviousness’ of the disconnection between an immediate reality of grinding rural poverty and the world of high finance.

There are a score of novels that represent the impact of finance capital in Brazil during the export boom far more explicitly than does *Trash*. Renata Wasserman notes, for example, how works “by Lima Barreto, Julia Lopes de Almeida, and Afonso de Taunay drew, for plot and characterization, on the conditions of living in an export economy dependent on international markets [. . .]. In all these cases, literature was responding to financial conditions both local and international.”⁷³ Almeida’s novel, however, provides us with a kind of phenomenology of financialization as this was experienced in the rural peripheries, away from the whirl of the stock exchange in, say, Rio de Janeiro (the setting for de Taunay’s *O encilhamento*). *Trash*’s original Portuguese title, *A Bagaceira*, derives from the name of the place used to store bagasse, the fibrous matter that remains after sugar-cane has been crushed and the juice extracted. It very obviously alludes to the sugar industry’s devitalization of land and labour, its production of value through the systematic production of waste. But if the text thereby foregrounds the environment-making dynamics of the commodity frontier, its formal and stylistic logics bear the marks of a different kind of trash – the claims of fictitious capital which, just a year after Almeida’s novel was published, would be reduced to junk by the financial crash of 1929 and the subsequent depression.

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Notes:

¹ Marx, *Poverty of Philosophy*, 127.

² Ibid.

³ McNally, *Monsters of the Market*, 132.

⁴ WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development*, 15.

⁵ Ibid., 20.

⁶ Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism*, 2-3

⁷ Marx, *Capital*, 375-76.

⁸ Marx, *Capital. Vol. 3* (1967), 745.

⁹ Moore, *Capitalism*, 54-55.

¹⁰ Ibid., 54.

¹¹ Moore, "Capitalocene," 38.

¹² Clover, "Autumn," 42.

¹³ Arrighi, *Long Twentieth Century*, 220.

¹⁴ Barraclough, *Introduction*, 44.

¹⁵ Arrighi, *Long Twentieth Century*, 177.

¹⁶ Ibid., 275.

¹⁷ Ibid., 178.

¹⁸ See, for example, the work collected at the *Discard Studies* website:

<http://discardstudies.com/>

¹⁹ The literature is vast, but with special reference to representations of waste in cultural production see, for example, Lincoln, *Expensive Shit*; Gamber, *Positive Pollutions*; Phillips

and Sullivan, "Material Ecocriticism"; Bragard, "Introduction"; Morrison, *Literature of Waste*.

²⁰ Bauman, *Wasted Lives*; again, the literature is vast, but for a useful summary see McIntyre and Nast, "Bio(necro)polis."

²¹ Denning, "Wageless Life," 96.

²² Yates, "The Huamn-as-Waste," 1687.

²³ Gidwani, "Six Theses," 1

²⁴ Gidwani and Reddy, "The Afterlives of 'Waste'," 1626.

²⁵ Goldstein, *Terra Economica*, 357; Porter, *Unlearning*, 56; Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters*, 43.

²⁶ Marx, *Capital Vol. 3* (1981), 180.

²⁷ Marx, *Capital*, 783, 782.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 793.

²⁹ Denning, "Wageless Life," 82.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Brantlinger and Higgins, "Waste and Value," 454.

³² *Ibid.*, 460

³³ See Miller, "Sustainable Socialism."

³⁴ Arrighi, *Long Twentieth Century*, 96.

³⁵ Musson, "The Great Depression," 202, 225.

³⁶ See Collins, "The Rationality."

³⁷ Hardy, *Tess*, 329.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 337, 330

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 337.

⁴⁰ Hardy, "On the Western Circuit," 244-45. Hereafter cited in the text.

⁴¹ Plotz, “Motion Sickness”, 369.

⁴² Ibid., 379.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 380.

⁴⁵ See Triner and Wandschneider, “The Baring Crisis.”

⁴⁶ Baucom, *Specters*, 32.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 66.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 64.

⁴⁹ Godden, “Labour,” 419.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 420.

⁵² Clover, “Autumn,” 44-45.

⁵³ Perry, *British Agriculture*, xiv.

⁵⁴ Albuquerque, *The Invention*, 14.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Rogers, *Deepest Wounds*, 51.

⁵⁷ Davis, *Late Victorian*, 382, 380.

⁵⁸ Albuquerque, *The Invention*, 67.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 68.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 102.

⁶¹ Anderson, *Disaster Writing*, 93.

⁶² Ibid., 65.

⁶³ The most infamous of such state interventions was the bloody campaign waged against the town of Canudos in 1897.

⁶⁴ Frank, *Capitalism*, 174-75.

⁶⁵ Anderson, *Disaster Writing*, 90-91.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 90. Although I do not have space to pursue the point in more detail here, it is worth emphasizing how both Hardy's and Almeida's texts turn on a problematic or abortive marriage, in which anxieties over the need to 'domesticate' a working-class woman speak to contemporary struggles to discipline female bodies in the quest to secure new streams of unpaid work in the context of an economic downturn.

⁶⁷ Frank, *Capitalism*, 175.

⁶⁸ Almeida, *Trash*, 154, 29-30. Hereafter cited in the text.

⁶⁹ La Rocque, "Fields of Force," 406.

⁷⁰ Davis, *Late Victorian*, 392.

⁷¹ Frank, *Capitalism*, 174.

⁷² Ellison, *Brazil's New Novel*, 30.

⁷³ Wasserman, "Financial Fictions," 194.

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